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ABSTRACT

A case is made for public schools of choice based on major strands of evidence from the perspective of students, parents, and teachers. This is followed by a brief overview covering the extent of schools of choice, the nature of their support, their organizational features, and their accomplishments. The critical feature of the school choice issue is that the school is selected by the student and family. Two major types of schools affiliated with the concept are alternative and magnet schools. Schools of choice offer positive outcomes in terms of student achievement and teacher satisfaction. Appended are 135 references. (SI)

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The Case for Public Schools of Choice

by
Mary Anne Raywid

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Introduction

Family background, economic status, and place of residence all matter a great deal in determining whether a youngster will succeed in school. But it is possible that the particular school attended *and whether the youngster is there by choice* matter even more (Oritz-Chaparro 1980; Sexton 1985). In this fastback the author makes a case for public schools of choice based on major strands of evidence supporting the choice idea from the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers. This is followed by a brief overview covering the extent of schools of choice, the nature of their support, their organizational features, and finally their accomplishments.

The phrase "schools of choice" encompasses a broad category of organizational structures. Its critical feature is that the school is selected by the student and family. As used here, the phrase applies to any type of school – or separate administrative unit within a school – that has its own personnel (students and teachers) who are affiliated with the program by choice, and has its own separate program. The two major types are alternative schools and magnet schools. Alternative schools usually are established as a single program, or one of a very few in a district, for the purpose of responding to the unmet needs or interests of particular groups of students, parents, or teachers. A magnet school is more likely to be one of several such schools within a district, established to achieve desegregation and/or to offer quali-

ty educational programs around a common theme, for example, science and math, health services, performing arts, or international studies. Magnet schools tend to be found in large urban districts. Alternative schools can be found in districts of any size.

The Case for Student Choice

The three fundamental premises underlying the choice idea are that 1) there is no one best school for everyone, 2) it is necessary to provide diversity in school structure and programs in order to accommodate all students and to enable them to succeed, and 3) students will perform better and accomplish more in learning environments they have freely chosen than in those to which they are simply assigned. All three of these basic premises have gathered empirical support over the last several years.

The need for diversity in order to accommodate the full range of students' requirements and dispositions is strongly suggested in the nation's dropout and failure rates. Dropout figures as high as 75% have been reported in some urban areas for some populations. Yet, documentation of real reversals or turn-arounds by previously unsuccessful and disaffected learners shows that many failures simply need not happen. A number of studies have shown remarkable improvement by low achievers when placed in new and different learning environments – improvement in attitudes toward school and learning, in attendance, in behavior patterns, and in achievement (Foley and McConnaughy 1982). Such students have frequently turned from chronic truancy to regular attendance. And they have sometimes achieved multi-year achievement gains, as measured by standardized tests, within a matter of months (Konrad 1979).

An analysis of dropout patterns in Portland, Oregon, showed clearly that the school attended has more to do with whether a student drops out than does the student's economic circumstances or race (Sexton 1985). The data also revealed that students who attend a school of choice have much lower dropout rates than do students assigned to a school. Broadening the opportunity for choice, concludes Sexton, could do much to prevent dropping out. A team studying at-risk students in Chicago reached the same conclusion (Kyle et al. 1986).

For many, the different learning environment appears to be the key. Poignant testimony to this effect comes from the dramatic improvements some youngsters make in an alternative environment, only to revert to their earlier problem behavior patterns on returning to their former school (McCann and Landi 1986). This regression pattern is common in districts that operate short-term alternative programs and assume that, after special remediation, students will function adequately in the "regular" program. Such an assumption leads to classifying students as remediation failures, when actually what has failed is the assumption that we can elicit adequate performance from all in a single environment. What many of these students need is simply a different learning environment. Moreover, it seems clear that having only one alternative to the conventional program does not suffice. The needs of youngsters vary sufficiently that a *variety* of learning environments is necessary if all are to succeed (Ghory 1978; Sinclair and Ghory 1987).

Conventional schools adequately serve students with particular cognitive and personal orientations. They place a premium on the ability to sit still and to learn by listening to the teacher. But such schools do not serve all students well. Perhaps this explains why some school districts have officially classified up to 30% of their boys as "hyperactive" and as many as 35% as learning disabled or brain-damaged (McGuinness 1986). It seems more plausible that many of these students are simply "active learners" described in the literature on learning styles (Reckinger 1987).

As a result of his research on varied learning environments, Robert Fizzell concludes that the very traits enabling students to succeed in one environment would probably result in low performance in another. One type of student has the ability and disposition to work largely independently with minimal interaction and external support along the way (Fizzell 1975). Another type has considerable skill in collaborative activity (Fizzell 1987). Still another achieves best with active learning approaches (Fizzell 1979). Fizzell's findings make a one-best-way approach to schooling, with its uniformity and standardization, both arbitrary and morally questionable. The evidence suggests that if given a choice among a variety of school environments, many more students could succeed.

What researchers have discovered about the power of choice, as well as about learning styles, strongly suggests that students are likely to be more productive in learning environments they choose. The power of choice is confirmed by a series of studies by Barry Fraser. One examined learning outcomes in 116 junior high school classes, with some featuring environments preferred by the students enrolled and others presenting different kinds of environments. This study showed that matching students to preferred learning environments enhances both cognitive and affective outcomes. Fraser goes on to suggest that the person-environment fit eventually may be shown to be just as important to positive learning outcomes as the adequacy of an environment (Fraser 1983).

Stern (1970) hypothesized some years ago that when environmental "press" or demands complement personal needs, student outcomes will be enhanced. Several investigations of schools of choice have since used Stern's work to show the importance of person-environment congruence (Corda 1987; Gluckstern 1974). These and other studies confirm the importance of the particular fit between the individual student and the learning environment.

More direct empirical support for the value of school choice is accumulating. The classic study by Richard Nault (1975) found major

differences in the school commitments of adolescents who had chosen their school compared to those whose parents had done the choosing. His findings have since been replicated by Gary F. Hartman (1980). Robert B. Kottkamp (1979) studied the effects of choice on students who selected the public mini-school they attended compared to others in the same school who did not select it. He also found stronger commitment and higher achievement on the part of the choosers. A number of studies have found student satisfaction levels higher in schools of choice compared to satisfaction levels of students attending schools to which they have been assigned (Livingston 1982; Nicholson 1980).

These several lines of research, then, support the conclusion that there is no single best approach to learning for all youngsters. Therefore, a strong case exists for a diversity of school environments with programs that are aligned with student needs and interests. This underscores the importance of *student* choice.

FASTBACK

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The Case for Public Schools of Choice

Mary Anne Raywid

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The Case for Parent Choice

The premises underlying the case for parent choice of school are similar to those for student choice, but with some slight differences. These premises are: 1) there are many viable and desirable ways to educate children; 2) there is no one best program that can respond to the diverse educational preferences found in a pluralistic, democratic society; 3) it is desirable to offer diversity in school programs to meet family value patterns and orientations.

Paralleling the case for the *need* for diversity is the case for its *desirability*. The evidence comes from investigations of private schools, effective schools, and public schools of choice. It is frequently found that parent satisfaction levels in public schools of choice are unusually high (Blank et al. 1983; Raywid 1982b), and that they dramatically outstrip approval and satisfaction levels in comparable local schools (Nicholson et al. 1980). Donald Erickson suggests several plausible explanations for such findings. "The act of choosing," he writes, "may sensitize parents to special school benefits that would otherwise go unnoticed." Moreover, "Having made a choice, human beings do not like to be proven wrong and, hence, tend to demonstrate commitment by attempting to ensure that the choice turns out well." It also is possible that "Freedom to choose may generate a sense of power that itself enhances commitment." And finally, "voluntary affiliation means that a school cannot take its patrons for granted" (Erickson 1982, pp. 407-408).

The provision for choice earns parent support for yet another reason: It apparently has salutary effects on schools by increasing their effectiveness in facilitating student growth and achievement. The work of several researchers with private schools and effective public schools suggests that the intervening variable is value and mission consensus, as well as the social cohesion that ensues (Erickson 1982; Grant 1981; Purkey and Smith 1983; Salganik and Karweit 1982). Since public schools of choice, as well as private schools, are likely to have a distinctive, identifiable focus, they attract a group that is likeminded in some educationally significant way. To the extent that teachers, parents, and students agree on a mission, a commitment is generated that enables the school to become an effective learning community.

Sociologists have long noted the difference between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* communities. The latter are not genuine communities; rather they are simply people assembled by such formal means as law or contract. *Gemeinschaft* communities, on the other hand, represent genuine communities of people, who are tied to one another by mutual loyalties and shared beliefs. *Gemeinschaft* groups have increasingly been recognized as important to school success, which led Erickson et al. to draw the following policy conclusion for the public schools:

> If . . . *Gemeinschaft* is generally an essential attribute of effective schools, then it would seem to follow that different types of schools should be created for people with different preferences and lifestyles, that school clients should be reasonably homogeneous and socially cohesive, and that mechanisms should be created to filter out parents who will not be supportive of a given school. (1982, p. 16)

The last several years have added substantial evidence that it is, indeed, school climate differences that most clearly distinguish successful from less effective schools. Moreover, the comprehensive American high school, long touted as an ideal, can also be seen as an institution lacking focus and as a source of discord (Powell et al. 1985; Salganik and Karweit 1982). "Schools with diffuse, unarticu-

lated, or even contradictory goals probably inspire little commitment," concludes Erickson (1982, p. 410).

Erickson and his colleagues (1982) are probably the only group to have undertaken comparison studies of the climates in private schools, regular or "mainstream" public schools, and public schools of choice. Although they found the climate in private schools superior, they found public schools of choice to have a clear advantage over other public schools with regard to climate. "It appears," they concluded, "that the public alternative schools have found a way of creating the same kind of school social climate that distinguishes private schools, though not to the same degree" (1982, p. 15).

The superiority of private over public schools is now being argued on a variety of grounds in addition to climate. Claims are made that parochial schools in particular produce more and better learning, especially for disadvantaged youngsters (Coleman et al. 1981; Lee 1985). Some researchers now claim that the private school advantage is inherent and inevitable (Chubb 1987). Whether or not this is eventually borne out, current research attributes considerable advantage to the choice feature alone, a feature that public schools can certainly adopt. As we shall see later, there is abundant evidence that public school parents want choice, that they are more satisfied with and have more confidence in schools that provide it, that parent choice increases the commitment and cohesion within schools extending it, and that these attributes combine to improve school quality and to make schools more effective.

The Case for Teacher Choice

Schools of choice have pronounced positive effects on their teachers and administrators. A recent statement by an alternative school teacher/coordinator suggests why:

> Alternative education stimulates personal and academic growth of staff as much as students. . . . I admit it! I'm in alternative education for many selfish reasons – I like pleasant working conditions, enjoy growing as a person, and love interacting with healthy people. What continues to amaze me is that these selfish considerations have encouraged me to provide a more stimulating, growing, healthy environment for my students. How great! I think it's called synergy! (Seymour 1988)

The enthusiasm expressed in the quotation above is consistent with research reporting high satisfaction levels among teachers in alternative schools (Gladstone and Levin 1982; Kottkamp 1974; Lytle 1980; Mahon-Lowe 1986; Raywid 1982). It also is consistent with management theory, which holds that high morale results when the personal goals of workers dovetail with the formal goals of the organizations in which they work. And job satisfaction results when a variety of personal needs are met (Lippitt and Rumley 1977). Schools of choice offer teachers more opportunities for self-actualization than do traditional schools. It is for this reason that some have suggested that the factor of choice makes for a "teachers' school" (Lytle 1980).

Schools of choice are able to minimize if not eliminate major sources of teacher dissatisfaction, such as feelings of powerlessness, professional isolation, fragmentation of the curriculum, the depersonalized climate of large schools, low esteem for teachers, severe discipline problems, and external mandates interfering with effective teaching and productive interaction with students (Cohn et al. 1987; Olson 1986). How schools of choice respond to each of these sources of dissatisfaction is discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

As a result of various frustrations – and the influence of disenchanted senior colleagues who have been experiencing these frustrations longer – new teachers tend rather quickly to take on a custodial attitude toward students and instruction in general (Hoy 1968). They expend considerable energy just keeping order, and they routinize their work in ways that are less creative and less responsive to students (McNeil 1988). Teachers with such a custodial perception do, in fact, spend comparatively more time on classroom discipline (Cusick 1983).

But these custodial tendencies are not inevitable, and they do not seem to appear in schools of choice. Such schools combine the *opportunity* for professional development for teachers with the *need* for it. For teachers in a school of choice, there is both an expectation and a challenge to create and sustain a distinctive program – one that differs significantly from the routinization often found in a traditional school setting. In schools of choice teachers engage in collective reflection on school purposes and collaborate to design and implement a program. Thus they must confront questions about curriculum and instruction and come up with programs designed to answer those questions – expectations not commonly found in most traditional schools (Kottkamp 1974; Lortie 1975; Sarason 1978-1979).

Such responsibilities give teachers in schools of choice much more autonomy than is common in traditional schools (Mahon-Lowe 1986; Raywid 1982). And these schools are more autonomous within the system. In schools of choice, the typical controls of traditional schools

tend to shift from regulation by rules and rigid role definitions to regulation by consensus arrived at by conscious attention to shared purposes (Swidler 1979; Talbert 1988). Teachers who elect to work in a school of choice find this kind of control less restrictive and easier to live with. Thus teachers in schools of choice perceive their work as substantially more professional than do teachers in more traditional schools (Gladstone and Levin 1982; Kottkamp 1974).

Other characteristics of schools of choice that make them attractive to teachers are: they tend to be smaller, with less hierarchy and fewer status differences (Duke 1976; Raywid 1982; Swidler 1979), and they offer more opportunity for teachers to define their own roles (Hamilton 1981; Swidler 1979). Where roles and responsibilities are less rigidly defined, there is room for more personalization, more responsiveness to the strengths and interests of individual teachers.

In schools of choice, a number of the conditions producing teacher frustration in other schools do not exist. Teachers typically have the authority to vary instructional modes as they deem necessary; they are not isolated since they must work collaboratively; their work role is defined more by personal strengths and interests than by rigid divisions of labor; and there are fewer external directives hemming them in. Finally, teacher-administrator relations tend to be less adversarial because administrators are more directly involved in the instructional issues that concern teachers (Blank 1986; Kottkamp 1979; Raywid 1982), and because administrators in schools of choice tend to function as instructional leaders, not just as managers (Bindman 1981; Blank 1986; Wolf, Walker, and Mackin 1974).

Student-teacher relations in schools of choice tend to be more satisfying and, at the same time, more professionally rewarding. Because the students are there by choice, there is a bond of common interests and a commitment to make the school work. According to teacher testimony, there is less need for student control measures (Blank et al. 1983; Trickett 1978). Behavior requiring disciplinary action is noticeably reduced in such schools (Perry and Duke 1978; Raywid

1982). Students perceive teachers as more caring and helpful (Arnove and Strout 1980; Sweeney 1983). There is more trust between students and teachers (Sweeney 1983), and students acknowledge that their teachers contribute to their success (Kottkamp 1974; Moilanen, 1987). Certainly these conditions differ markedly from those where teachers complain of little recognition or reward for what they do.

The conditions in schools of choice, as described above, no doubt contribute to the heightened sense of teacher efficacy. In addition, these same conditions contribute to teacher success in terms of higher student achievement levels (Di Blasi 1987; Larson and Allen 1988; Los Angeles 1983-84, 1984-85, 1985-86; Magi 1985). Such outcomes contrast markedly with the despair inner-city teachers feel about their chances for success (Purkey and Rutter 1987).

The idea that a school of choice is a "teachers' school" is valid, because such schools provide the conditions for both personal and professional growth. As Mary Metz (1988) puts it, they combine "official license and obligation to innovate." Such schools offer congenial working conditions that are unusually supportive of instructional success. Thus it is not surprising that teachers in schools of choice are so committed to working in them, and why they are so unwilling to leave (Magi 1985). In Philadelphia, after retrenchments brought involuntary transfers into and out of an alternative school, those forced out wanted to return and those involuntarily assigned opted to stay. After a year, 38 of the 39 teachers involuntarily transferred to an alternative school chose to stay there in preference to any other assignment (Lytle 1980).

Schools of Choice in Context

Demographic data about schools of choice are relatively scant. There have been only two national surveys of such schools in the past decade, one focusing on public alternative high schools (Raywid 1982) and the other looking at magnet schools at all grade levels (Blank et al. 1983). The magnet school survey located 1,019 such programs. The alternative school survey located 2,500 but estimated that the actual total might be three or four times that number. Both these surveys were conducted in 1981 and now appear dated. Without an up-to-date survey, there is no way of determining the total number of such schools; but there are reasons to believe that the number of such schools is now substantially higher.

We know, for example, that the magnet school concept is spreading; and many are being opened for a variety of purposes. Court desegregation orders, or the threat of such orders, have been a factor in establishing magnet schools in many areas. About 500 school districts remain under desegregation orders; others are seeking to avert such orders by offering choice plans. (See fastback 141 *Magnet Schools: An Approach to Voluntary Desegregation*, by Charles B. McMillan.) Other districts are adopting the magnet concept as a general reform strategy or as a mechanism for school revitalization. This, too, has served to stimulate the spread of magnet schools. Another impetus has been the renewed interest in dropout prevention, with the argument that the opportunity to select a different learning en-

vironment might entice marginal students to remain in school and to improve their chances for success.

Together, these three reasons – desegregation, revitalization, and dropout prevention – are probably responsible for a large percentage of the schools of choice launched in the 1980s. Because these problems are likely to appear more urgent in urban than in suburban or rural areas, a higher percentage of schools of choice now are concentrated in cities than was earlier the case. During the 1970s it appeared that the school choice idea was almost as likely to be adopted by suburban as by urban districts (Raywid 1982).

The magnet school survey confirmed that only a relatively small percentage of students in districts offering choice plans were actually enrolled in schools or programs of choice. The figures reported ranged from 1% to 37% (Blank et al. 1983). Those percentages have no doubt changed now, since some districts have designated groups of schools as schools of choice. In Massachusetts all Cambridge and Acton elementary schools operate on a choice basis, and Fall River is on the way to such a system. Rochester, New York, has announced such a plan for its high schools; and in New York City's District 4 in Harlem, all junior high schools are schools of choice. District 4 also offers options at the elementary level and now at the secondary level as well. It reports that more than 55% of its students attend schools of choice.

By and large, even in districts with several schools of choice, most students are assigned to the schools they attend. Typically this occurs because of limits on the number of spaces available in schools of choice. New York City's District 4 is an exception in this regard. Here interest in one elementary school program prompted the opening of another like it, then a third, and eventually the choice plan was extended to the secondary level. Elsewhere, however, district decision makers often fail to respond to such interest. Newspapers have carried stories of parents standing in line for days in order to enroll their children in a particular school of choice (Kalson 1986;

Feinberg 1986), and even of a high school with 900 openings and 35,000 applicants (Ravitch 1986).

It appears that when choice plans are offered, large numbers of students and their families want to take advantage of such an opportunity. But it also appears that this type of "consumer appeal" has not always convinced school districts to make choice plans widely available. To put it differently, the choice idea evidently appeals to some school boards that have adopted it on only a very limited basis, not as an arrangement for all or most schools in their district (Block 1981).

However, the choice concept has been receiving substantial support from three other important groups: politicians, business, and the public at large. The political support has come largely from governors, notably Governor Rudy Perpich of Minnesota, and occasionally from legislators. Governors have proposed a variety of choice arrangements, ranging from schools of choice for the ablest students (so-called Governors' Schools) to providing second-chance options for the weakest students. There also have been concurrent enrollment arrangements permitting high school students to pursue college-level courses and others permitting students in smaller schools to opt to attend larger ones across district lines. (See fastback 284 *Concurrent Enrollment Programs: College Credit for High School Students*, by Arthur Richard Greenberg.)

Business organizations, too, have supported the choice concept. At both state and national levels, they have produced influential reports in which choice is recommended as a means for improving school quality and simultaneously making schools more responsive to diverse student needs, more accountable to parents, and better equipped to satisfy the economy's needs. At the local level, business as well as political and civic groups are recommending choice plans as a way to enhance public education. In Hawaii, for example, the League of Women Voters (1986) and the Health and Community Services Council and United Way (1987) have endorsed choice plans and are urging that they be adopted as a means of school improvement.

There appears to be broad public support for schools of choice. Indeed, the American people agree more about the desirability of choice than about any other educational matter! In the 1987 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Education, an impressive 71% of all adults polled expressed the view that parents should be entitled to select the public schools their children will attend. And 76% of public school parents took this position, including many who are quite satisfied with their children's current school (Gallup and Clark 1987).

A difference in the way the choice question was put to respondents in the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll in 1986 and 1987 may mask an even more significant change in public sentiment than the percentages reveal. In 1986, 68% of public school parents polled *desired* choice, whereas in 1987, 76% felt they were *entitled* to it. At the same time, however, it is clear that the public is not supporting choice that would subsidize private or parochial schools. In fact, the percentage reacting positively to the voucher idea, which allows parents to chose *any* school, public or private, has declined significantly from a high of 51% in 1983 to 44% in 1987 (Gallup and Clark 1987). Thus, it appears there is a strong trend for choice among public schools while, at least for the moment, sentiment for including private schools as a subsidized choice seems to be on the wane.

Organizational Features of Schools of Choice

For nearly two decades researchers have tried to identify the factors that differentiate so-called "effective schools" from those that are less effective. (See fastback 276 *Effective Schools Research: Practice and Promise*, by Arthur W. Steller.) One of the factors most commonly identified is a positive school climate, which many now take to be a key determinant of school success (Purkey and Smith 1983). It appears that such intangibles as how people in a school interact with one another and the fundamental beliefs and commitments underlying their behavior are key factors in creating an effective school. Schools of choice seem to enjoy pronounced advantages in this regard.

Gregory and Smith (1983a and b, 1987) have done extensive study of the climates of public schools of choice. They have now examined 44 schools in 14 states and have queried almost 4,000 students and 1,000 teachers. They also have undertaken studies comparing the climates in schools of choice with those of schools of assignment, which students would otherwise have attended. Their findings in several studies consistently favor the choice arrangement; and the advantage holds irrespective of the nature of the program in the school of choice, the type of students served, or the locale.

Gregory and Smith (1983) asked both students and teachers in the schools they studied about the climates of their schools and about the climate they thought a school ought to have. They found that alternative school students have higher expectations for their schools than

do their peers in conventional schools, and their judgments are more positive about the extent to which the school lives up to their expectations. They found the same attitudes among teachers in alternative schools.

Gregory and Smith tried to determine the extent to which a school responds to individual needs as identified by Maslow's needs hierarchy. They found that, in the judgment of both students and teachers, alternative schools far surpass conventional schools in this regard. In fact, even the *least* responsive alternative schools were found to be better than the *most* responsive conventional schools. Gregory and Smith have not always examined academic outcomes in their comparative studies, but in one study comparing alternative schools with their conventional school counterparts, they found higher achievement levels as well as climate advantages in the schools of choice (1983).

School climate, of course, is a direct reflection of a school's organizational structure and processes. Thus it is no accident that many schools of choice differ strikingly in this regard from other public schools. The first such schools established in the late 1960s were typically inspired by parents and/or teachers deliberately seeking different organizational structures and processes, requiring departures from existing procedures. Early on it became apparent that the departures were producing quite different kinds of organizations. It is the organizational dimensions of schools of choice that researchers have studied most often.

Typically, in alternative schools, teachers and students exercise both more autonomy and responsibility than is the case in conventional schools (Mahon-Lowe 1986; Raywid 1982). These schools are not organized hierarchically and do not operate according to usual bureaucratic controls and procedures (Swidler 1979). The role definitions of staff are unusually flexible compared to the narrowly delineated roles of conventional schools (Ducharme 1981). And teachers participate in much more collaborative activity than is usually the case (Warren 1976).

Researchers cite these organizational characteristics to explain high levels of teacher satisfaction, low absenteeism rates, and positive student response in schools of choice (Erickson 1986). These same characteristics create the school climate and ethos that promotes achievement and a sense of accomplishment for all involved (Erickson 1982; Grant 1981, 1982).

There is considerable evidence that many schools of choice launched during the 1980s (mostly magnet schools) have been much less innovative with regard to organizational structure (McNeil 1987; Raywid 1987). The focus in these schools has tended to be on program innovation, not organizational restructuring (Metz 1988). This is unfortunate in light of the mounting evidence of the positive impact that organizational changes make on the attitudes, behavior, and accomplishment of workers in all types of organizations (Gitlin 1981; Peters and Waterman 1982; Sizer 1984; Stevens 1985). The narrowing to programmatic change seems to be occurring at the very time research is documenting that organizational structure may be precisely what most needs changing in public schools (Chubb 1987; Chubb and Moe 1985, 1986). Among the organizational features now being found particularly important to school success are focused and coherent goals (Salganik and Karweit 1982), control emanating from shared values and goal agreement rather than in response to external directives and constraints (Talbert 1988), and teacher autonomy in their own classrooms (Darling-Hammond 1984). All these features were characteristic of the early schools of choice. As Metz (1988) has suggested, schools of choice have an "innovative charter." This should typically include *organizational* innovation.

Accomplishments of Schools of Choice

Some claim that choice advocates have offered little real evidence of student achievement outcomes of schools of choice. While this is not true, there are limitations in the kinds of evidence available. First, virtually none of it is experimental; most of the available evidence comes from correlational studies or from evaluations of individual programs with no comparisons with control groups. The lack of experimental studies makes it difficult to isolate cause-and-effect relationships, for example, to tell whether academic achievement in a particular school can be attributed to the school climate, the nature of the curriculum, the motivation of the students, or the instructional effectiveness and dedication of the teachers. Thus, explanations must remain hypotheses.

Within these limits, however, there are extensive findings on both choice systems and on individual schools of choice. The following can be said, primarily on the basis of four research studies dealing with student achievement in 139 schools of choice (magnet schools) located in 11 cities and suburban areas across the country. The cities include Los Angeles; Buffalo, Mt. Vernon, Newburgh, New Rochelle, New York City, Poughkeepsie, Rochester, and Syracuse in New York State; and a suburban area, Montgomery County, Maryland. Except for the 14 elementary school magnets in Montgomery County, all of the schools involved are at the secondary level.

Based on achievement as measured by standardized tests, schools of choice are highly successful. In New York City's District 4 in Harlem, where earlier test scores placed it at the very bottom of the

city's 32 community school districts, now 62% of the youngsters read at or above grade level. And state tests in 1986 found 75% of the district's eighth-graders to be competent writers as well (Di Blasi 1987). In studies of 41 magnet schools in New York State, of 84 in Los Angeles, and of 14 in Montgomery County, Maryland, all found students' reading and math scores above district and/or national averages (Magi 1985; Los Angeles 1983-84, 1984-85, 1985-86; Larson and Allen 1988). Furthermore, there is evidence that the longer youngsters have been in the school of choice, the greater their relative advantage (Larson and Allen 1988; Los Angeles 1983-84).

In Montgomery County, magnet school students had no achievement advantage over those of the control group when they entered the magnet program in the third grade; but by the sixth grade magnet students' scores exceeded those of the control group. Thus, on such a conventional indicator of success as standardized tests, magnet schools appear superior. One explanation for this success is that there apparently is a stronger task orientation in classrooms in schools of choice than in conventional schools. This was a finding in one of the annual studies of Los Angeles' magnet schools (1984-85); and it also has been confirmed by research undertaken elsewhere. Students are academically engaged for a higher percentage of the time in schools of choice than in other schools (Trickett 1978).

Another way to assess school success is in terms of students' attitudes toward the school, toward their teachers, and toward education in general. Here again, schools of choice appear to have a strong advantage. Annual evaluations of Los Angeles magnet programs consistently find students' attitudes toward school to be more positive than those of the majority of the nation's students at the same grade level (1983-84, 1984-85, 1985-86). Moreover, the longer students remain in the school of choice, the more positive are their attitudes toward the program (Los Angeles 1983-84).

One aspect of student attitudes appears particularly noteworthy: While it is not unusual for successful students in *any* school to be

positively disposed toward their school, what seems unique about schools of choice is the finding that positive attitudes prevail even among less successful students (Larson and Allen 1988; Stevens 1985). This finding is important in two regards: First, having a positive attitude toward school helps to permit future success. And second, it leads to positive behavior. Thus, the capacity of schools of choice to generate a liking for school, even among weak students, is an important accomplishment.

In addition to positive attitudes toward school, schools of choice seem to enjoy improved student behavior (Perry and Duke 1978; Raywid 1982). Vandalism rates are lower in these schools compared to other schools in their communities (Arnove and Strout 1980). Average daily attendance rates were found to be higher in 90% of New York State's magnet schools than in others (Magi 1985). And the attendance of individual students was found to improve over their previous records in 81% of alternative schools responding to a national survey (Raywid 1982). Dropout rates in schools of choice consistently fall below district averages (Magi 1985; Sexton 1985). New York State magnets reported suspension rates below district averages (Magi 1985).

In a major national study, Blank and his colleagues (1983) documented the success of magnet schools in winning the approval of parents and other community members and in enhancing general perceptions of school quality. Parent response to the choice idea in general appears highly positive. In New York State, 98% of the parents responding to an opinion survey indicated they would recommend magnets to other parents. Two out of three responding parents felt magnet schools did a better job with instruction, motivation, and personal development (Magi 1985). In Montgomery County, too, over the last several years parents have rated their magnet schools "a strong B+" (Larson and Allen 1988).

Even though attendance at a magnet school often requires that students travel some distance from their neighborhoods, this has not

resulted in low parent involvement and participation. Reports on programs in both New York and Maryland indicate that, despite the distances involved, parents engage in conferences with teachers, make classroom visits, and do volunteer work in the magnet schools. In Montgomery County, three-fourths of the parents make at least one classroom visit per year, and almost half undertake volunteer activity (Larson and Allen 1988). In New York State, 50% of the parents regularly participated in school activities in almost half the schools studied – an extraordinary rate for the inner city where a number of these schools are located (Magi 1985).

Teachers, too, express positive attitudes toward schools of choice. A majority of those responding to an evaluation of the Los Angeles magnet program recommended expansion of the program. They felt magnets had improved academic achievement, fostered self-esteem, and substantially enhanced post-high school opportunities for their students (Los Angeles 1985-86). In New York, the teachers involved also expressed overwhelming support for the magnet concept (96%) and reported positively on the climate of their school – with 83% finding it a good working environment and 87% reporting considerable autonomy in managing their own classrooms. Moreover, the teacher turnover rates are unusually low in the magnet schools studied. A staff stability study in particular schools prior to and after magnet status showed that the magnet schools had approximately half the staff turnover compared to when these same schools were schools of assignment (Magi 1985).

Given these several indications of teacher satisfaction, it is not surprising that 80% rated their magnet schools superior to schools of assignment. Certainly the evidence reviewed here offers support for such a conclusion. There also are grounds for concluding that converting schools to schools of choice not only serves to revitalize the staff involved, but also may have a positive effect on the entire system (Magi 1985). Districtwide improvement of student performance has been found to follow the introduction of magnet schools (Magi

1985). And in Montgomery County, parent perceptions of non-magnet schools have risen to the point that they are now coming to rival the high esteem in which the schools of choice are held.

Such evidence of accomplishment, drawn from research involving large numbers of schools, is more authoritative but less vivid than the studies and evaluations of individual schools of choice. Statistical data showing the average success rates of groups of alternative schools obscures the real triumphs of individual schools. Testimony to the success of a few of these schools is captured in the citations below:

> Several years ago, the Alternative Program in State College, Pennsylvania, scored at the 99th percentile on 13 of the 14 areas measured by the state's standardized exams. The students are obviously an able group – but the state concluded that ability alone could not explain the success in more than half the areas tested. (Alternative Program 1983)

> Metro High School in Chicago, where dropout rates hover around 50%, graduates an impressive 90% of its students. A substantial number go on to college. Ninety-one percent of these youngsters are minority, and more than half come from low-income homes. (*School Report Card* 1986)

> Several years ago, students from the Davis Alternative Elementary School in Jackson, Mississippi, achieved the highest scores recorded in any of Jackson's 37 elementary schools (Scarboro 1985). Davis has not had to spend a single dollar on vandalism or property destruction for several years now. (Thompson 1988)

> A recent graduating class of the Village School in Great Neck, New York – a small alternative program – had almost 20% of the district's National Merit finalists, but only 2% of its graduates. (Raywid 1985)

> The Metropolitan Learning Center in Portland, Oregon, is a 19-year-old alternative school that is still growing – by 25% in the last three years. The dropout rate is 2% (compared with the district's 30% rate). The school has the highest per capita scholarship rate in the city. (Harris 1987)

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It is not surprising, then, that these schools garner strong support and high praise -- as in the case of New York City's District 4, perhaps the nation's most celebrated choice system. As one awestruck columnist commented, "If a renaissance in public education could occur in East Harlem, it can happen in any city in America." District 4, he concludes, has managed the impossible: it has "romanced the children of Harlem into the pleasures of the life of the mind" (Maynard 1987).

Conclusion

The research summarized in this fastback lends support to the choice concept from the viewpoints of students, parents, and teachers; and it shows that schools of choice offer positive outcomes in terms of student achievement and teacher satisfaction. Given this generally positive history, one might ask why schools of choice have not been more widely adopted.

Three possible explanations stand out. First, to adopt the choice concept on any but the most limited scale (for example, venturing one small program that departs minimally from the rest and requiring it to keep a low profile) calls for significant structural change within a school district, not just incremental change. If individual schools are to have more control over their programs and teachers' roles are to expand, then district policy and administrative practice must change accordingly. But large organizations are resistant to structural change, particularly when the changes are perceived as a threat to the vested interests of stakeholders in the organization.

A second reason why the choice idea has not been more widely adopted is that it challenges one of education's most deep-seated and broadly pursued assumptions: namely, that there must be one right answer to questions of educational practice, thus making all other answers inferior or wrong. As the reform mandates of the Eighties have demonstrated, this assumption drives politicians as strongly as it does education researchers and administrators. The flexibility and diver-

sity that characterize schools of choice deny this widespread epistemological assumption.

A third reason why schools of choice are not more widespread is that documentation of their successes has not been widely disseminated. People continue to assert that there is really minimal evidence to support them. A few national studies have commanded some attention, but the bulk of the extant evidence is in local studies, which never have had national visibility. An estimated 70 such studies were reported as of 1985, and undoubtedly the total is now above 100 (Magi 1985). But one rarely hears of them or their findings. Despite their methodological soundness, the New York State and the Los Angeles evaluations examined in this fastback apparently remain unknown even to some of the school officials in their own locales.

Gregory (1985) has characterized alternative schools as the "Cinderella" of the current reform movement in education. There are a remarkable number of proposals now being widely recommended as reforms, which have been implemented in alternative schools for some time. They include: reducing school size or dividing large schools into houses or schools-within-schools to counteract depersonalization; developing a strong ethos and sense of community, giving greater autonomy at the building level; recognizing the individual school building, or some unit within it, as the focus of change; involving parents and the community in a wider variety of roles; giving teachers a stronger role in school decision making; encouraging more collaboration and collective responsibility among teachers; using themes and other strategies to integrate curricula; emphasizing more learning by doing and interweaving action learning with conventional school work; offering more challenging and engaging school fare; using various forms of cooperative learning; adapting content and methods to meet the needs of individual learners; using more small-group and individualized instruction; involving students in community service; offering independent study options; and giving students greater responsibility for their own learning. All of these proposals and more have long

been implemented in alternative schools. The "Cinderella" metaphor seems appropriate, indeed, in relation to schools of choice. For a great many people, the discovery remains to be made. Perhaps this fastback will help them.

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